CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL SPILL: A CASE-BASED ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH

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Following the January 9, 2014, spill of an estimated 10,000 gallons of toxic crude 4-methylcyclohexanemethanol (MCHM) into the Elk River, which serves as a water supply for 300,000 West Virginians, the Tide Loads of Hope Program received many requests to bring their services to the area.[1] Tide Loads of Hope, according to their website, is a "mobile Laundromat" that travels to disaster zones in times of need. On January 12, three days after the accident, Tide posted the following message to their public Facebook Page:

> Thanks for all the interest in Tide Loads of Hope for Charleston, West Virginia. Our hearts go out to all those affected by this unfortunate event. We are investigating whether it's possible for Loads of Hope to help. Please stay tuned to our status updates for any announcements.

Two days later, water use restrictions were slowly lifted, zone by zone. Tide posted on Facebook: "We're pleased to learn there has been progress in lifting some of the water restrictions to the Charleston, WV area. At this time, we have decided not to send Loads of Hope since the time it takes to arrive and set up operations will likely be longer than the water ban." Tide's Facebook page was flooded with approximately 1,400 posts related to these two announcements, and the announcements were shared or posted on individuals' own Facebook pages a combined 1,434 times.

As a scholar interested in literacy and social justice, I was intrigued by the enormous response Tide received following the announcement. I was fascinated not only by this immense response but also by the format of the response. Social media

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1   Full disclosure: I am a native West Virginian who grew up in the region affected by this accident. My mom and stepdad could not use the water in their home for a week. We still doubt the safety of their water and use bottled water for drinking and cooking. My personal investment in this story led me to follow multiple details of the story closely.

websites like Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr have enabled writers to communicate with audiences immediately, therefore changing social activism dramatically. This effect of social media on movements like Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring was well documented by scholars like Summer Harlow and Thomas J. Johnson (2011), but there is an additional appeal to what Malcolm Gladwell (2010) referred to as "slacktivism" and Tony Scott and Nancy Welch (2014) called "clicktivism" (p. 565). Christina Neumayer and Judith Schoßböck (2011) wrote that slacktivism "can be defined as having done something good for society without actively engaging in politics, protest, or civil disobedience, or spending or raising money." While some scholars like Gladwell despairingly wrote that slacktivists "do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice," Stephanie Vie (2014a) argued that there are positive effects of slacktivism. She wrote that "in a world where microaggressions of all kinds are very real, the virtual support shown in one's community through sharing images of goodwill and support can in fact make a difference" and memes commonly utilized by slacktivists "help draw attention to societal issues and problems and can result in increased feelings of support for marginalized groups." This concept is closely related to what Caroline Dadas called "hashtag activism" in this collection.

While the immediacy of online publishing is certainly attractive, scholars like Welch (2008) helped us understand that "a post-September 11th development" has been the reduction of "public programs, rights, and geographic space" (p. 6). In light of the decline in opportunity and increase in risk for public protest, sites like Facebook have become an alternative for would-be protestors. Indeed, social media outlets have become what Elenore Long (2008) called a "local public," which she defined as "where it is that ordinary people most often go public" (p. 5). Brian Jackson and Jon Wallin (2009) argued that while we should not buy into the "rhetoric of inevitability" or the myth that the web will lead to a more democratic society, there is "little doubt that the Web has made possible democratic activity, even radical democratic activity, in ways unimaginable ten or more years ago" (p. W384). This activity, they argued, has changed not only public discourse but also commercial behaviors (p. W384).

But these forms of protest and activity create a conundrum for scholars who want to study this new kind of activism: How does one collect data for an ethnographic study of activism when this activism is conducted online? What ethical considerations must one make when researching a digital artifact or text? What familiar methodologies can we model in this new frontier? How do scholars address the challenge of connecting online action with actual impact?

In this chapter, my focus is on social media research, but I use my own study of social media responses to Tide to illustrate my points. I begin the chapter with a discussion of important methodological and ethical issues to consider in

research design, data collection, and reporting of results of social media research. I introduce two concepts, *consistent associations* and *remote associations,* terms that have helped guide my own research decisions. Next, using my own research to illustrate my points, I show how social media data acts differently than other data. I then move on to a discussion of my coding and results to illustrate how social media can come together, and I conclude with some recommendations for scholars interested in ethical practices for social media scholarship.

METHODOLOGY AND ETHICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH: CONSISTENT AND REMOTE ASSOCIATIONS

Many scholars (Banks & Eble, 2006; DePew, 2007; McKee & Porter, 2009, 2012; Sidler, 2007) have taken up the problems of ethical Internet research. Heidi McKee and James Porter (2009), for example, took up the important questions surrounding the citation of Internet posts. They showed that while researchers often want to keep users' identities anonymous, a simple Google search of "a fragment of a quotation" from a research study revealed the "entire post and then the original thread from 1994 where participants often used their first and last names from their offline world" in "0.34 seconds" (p. 107). Issues of informed consent are complicated in Internet research. Some argue that consent is not necessary because the information is easily accessible. Janne C. H. Bromseth (2006) did not accept this argument and saw the issue as much more complicated. Indeed, McKee and Porter (2012) urged social media scholars to realize that "notions of privacy are shifting" (p. 79). While some scholars may be tempted to think of all Internet data like "broadcast media" that should be treated like a text to be quoted rather than the content of a subject to be protected, this issue is much more complex.

I argue that one element that must be considered when making ethical decisions about research design and reporting is to consider the community in which the users are creating the texts, whether they are alphabetic or visual. This consideration aligns closely with what Julia Romberger (2007) called an ecofeminist methodology. This methodology aims to "reorient technology toward humanity" and requires scholars to "be aware of context and its complexity" in research (p. 250). Romberger argued that this "context is critical to rhetorical analysis because 'individuals . . . belong to discourse communities'" (p. 285). It is when users are operating strictly within these discourse communities—especially with long-term connections—that they must be most closely protected in research design and reporting. Consider online locations such as support groups, chat groups, and affinity group meeting spaces and it is easy to think of examples of groups that maintain long-term connections, or connections I have come to think of as *consistent*

associations. Consistent associations require longevity, repeated participation from individuals, and an archive of discussion.[2] Consistent associations may occur in various kinds of web spaces including social media, journaling and blogging, chat rooms, games, etc. During my research of the responses to Tide Loads of Hope, however, I found that these posts were the result of an altogether different kind of relationship between users I call *remote associations*. While the majority of these individuals were linked in that they were affected by the same industrial accident, there was not a long-term context to consider, nor was there a long-term event to study. These individuals may never interact online again.

As scholars have shown, Internet research is complex and context-dependent. McKee and Porter (2012) provide an excellent set of seven questions to consider for Internet research (pp. 246-253). Table 3.1 lists McKee and Porter's questions, how I answered each question for my research, and an example of how this question might be answered for a different kind of study.

Table 3.1: McKee and Porter's (2012) questions for Internet research

McKee and Porter's question	In my study . . .	A different study might find . . .
1. Are you studying texts or persons or both?	Because I determined these were remote associations, I felt I was studying text, not people.	An Internet chat group with consistent associations would likely include the study of people.
2. Do you view the Internet as a place or a space?	Privacy was not expected, so this was a space.	If privacy is expected, it is a place.
3. What are "public" and "private" online?	I drew an analogy to off-line research. Listening to public speech is public (a protest, for example).	Listening to private speech is private (placing an audio recorder under a park bench, for example).
4. Is informed consent necessary?	Consider the purpose of the speech act. (Many users who posted about the WV water crisis urged other users to share this information.) Also, consider risk.	Someone posting about marital abuse in a chat group likely does not want that information shared. Sharing that information not only violates the trust of the user but could also place them in danger.

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2   I'm including the archive as a requirement for consistent relations, though I acknowledge that websites like 4chan prohibit archival and may still host consistent relationships.

5. What is the degree of interaction of researcher with online participants?	My presence on the Tide page did not change the conversation. Posters did not assume their posts were only being read by a select group.	As I detail below, Facebook researchers recently found themselves in trouble when their interaction crossed over into manipulation.
6. What is the sensitivity of the material being used?	Consider intention: the posts on Tide's page were supposed to be public.	Content is sensitive when it is something the user may not utter to his or her own family, friends, or coworkers.
7. What is the vulnerability of the material being used?	Users who posted to Tide's page wanted to bring attention to this issue.	A group of users in an online support group might suffer from the attention brought to them or their online space by a published research study.

I want to emphasize that scholars must consider these questions on a case-by-case basis. And as McKee and Porter (2012) pointed out, "it is particularly important not to think individualistically but also collectively" (p. 252). In other words, while researchers are often juggling pressure from editors, deadlines, granting institutions, and pressures from both institutions and the public, social media scholars must think of how the attention their work may receive could negatively affect their research subjects.

Further, McKee and Porter argued that "if online data . . . is deemed to be public, then no consent is needed to study and quote from the materials (although copyright permissions may be needed)" (p. 250). However, this definition is more complicated than it seems. Consider the recent trouble Facebook found itself in (also discussed in Estee Beck's chapter in this collection). In March 2014, researchers at Facebook published the results of a study conducted in 2012 on nearly 700,000 users (approximately 0.04 percent of Facebook's users) to determine if the mood of posts in users' newsfeeds would affect users' moods. Facebook's scholars conducted this study without receiving informed consent from participants. To conduct the study, Facebook manipulated the items in users' newsfeeds to determine if the post they made after reading their newsfeed would reflect the same mood of posts in their feeds. The study argued that consent was unnecessary because it was implied in the terms of use each user must agree to upon creating an account. According to a Facebook post written on June 29, 2014, by the principal scholar on the study, Adam D. I. Kramer, the scholars involved felt the study was minimally invasive. Kramer (2013) explained, "Nobody's posts were 'hidden,' they just didn't show up on some loads of Feed. Those posts were always visible on friends' timelines, and

could have shown up on subsequent News Feed loads." He wrote that in his view, the benefits of the study outweighed the risks:

> The reason we did this research is because we care about the emotional impact of Facebook and the people that use our product. We felt that it was important to investigate the common worry that seeing friends post positive content leads to people feeling negative or left out. At the same time, we were concerned that exposure to friends' negativity might lead people to avoid visiting Facebook. We didn't clearly state our motivations in the paper.

Many people are understandably upset about this study. In an interview for *The Guardian*, scholar Max Masnick explained the outrage:

> As a researcher, you don't get an ethical free pass because a user checked a box next to a link to a website's terms of use. The researcher is responsible for making sure all participants are properly consented. In many cases, study staff will verbally go through lengthy consent forms with potential participants, point by point. Researchers will even quiz participants after presenting the informed consent information to make sure they really understand. (as cited in Arthur, 2014)

As Vie (2014b) showed, the terms of service question is even more problematized by the fact that most media users are not rhetorically aware of the implications of privacy and usage policies. In fact, while "terms of service documents are couched in legalese, difficult to read and understand for the average user," she cited a 2008 study by McDonald and Cranor that estimated "the average user would have to spend approximately forty minutes per day reading through the privacy policies" each time that user visited a new website (p. 175). And in a blog entry quoted in *The Guardian*, James Grimmelmann (2014), Professor of Law at the University of Maryland, clarified that this study did in fact do harm because human emotions were manipulated, and he drew parallels, much as I have in this chapter, to face-to-face research examples. He explained:

> The unwitting participants in the Facebook study were told (seemingly by their friends) for a week either that the world was a dark and cheerless place or that it was a saccharine paradise. That's psychological manipulation, even when it's carried out automatically. (para. 10)

As scholars have shown, social media research has opened up a host of new

questions about research methodologies and ethics that must be considered case-by-case and with an eye toward the rights of social media users. I will illustrate in the next section that the mechanics of research, data collection, and data storage pose specific challenges to social media researchers, as well.

SOCIAL MEDIA DATA

Social media texts are exciting and compelling for scholars who study writing because these artifacts are user-generated, published immediately, unfiltered by a proprietary third party, and (generally) uncensored. A social media text can grow, change, or even shrink by the minute. Studying social media texts helps scholars understand the exigent, current reactions from average people. For example, as I write this chapter, I am reading not only the United States Supreme Court's decision on *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores* (2014) and *Conestoga Wood Specialties v. Burwell* (2014)—cases that challenged the Affordable Health Care Act's mandate for employers to provide no-cost birth control to female employees—but also a torrent of responses on Facebook and Twitter. Within minutes of the announcement that the U.S. Supreme Court had decided on a 5-4 margin that the Affordable Health Care Act's mandate violates the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act, graphics and memes appeared in social media spaces explaining the court's decision and the potential impact of that decision. My understanding of the Supreme Court's ruling is enhanced because I also understand how friends, acquaintances, and strangers are reacting to the decision on their Tumblr pages. This context created by social media lends a deeper awareness to the impact of the decision, but because these social media texts move and transform so quickly, studying these texts can be especially complicated.

Similarly, in wake of the toxic industrial accident in the Elk River, I turned to social media sources to learn about how locals were reacting. As I became more interested in the Facebook users' responses to Tide Loads of Hope, I noticed that the number of comments on each post changed. For example, when I started this research on January 29, 2014, seventeen days after the second announcement, the initial post announcing the investigation received 423 posts, and the post announcing the decision against bringing the program to West Virginia received 956 posts. As I write this chapter in June 2014, the initial post has 421 replies (two fewer than before), and the second announcement remained steady at 956 comments. This decrease in comments on the initial post could be attributed to deleted comments or deactivated Facebook accounts. Facebook users commented on the story steadily until January 24. Given that social media users can delete their comments or deactivate their accounts at any given moment, social media data is vulnerable and timeliness

is important. As Stuart Blythe (2007) reminded us, web research is unstable (p. 204).

Since web research is unstable and data shifts, scholars studying social media texts must create archives of their research. While Internet programs like the Wayback Machine can provide users with archived webpages, these programs do not currently function with some social media websites and, specifically in my case, not with Facebook because, according to their Automated Data Collection Terms (2010), Facebook requires written permission for web crawlers to index their websites.[3] Facebook most likely instituted this policy to protect user data. Similarly, Twitter has terms of use for developers (2014) looking to utilize "Twitter's ecosystem of applications, services, and content" and all social media sites like Tumblr, Academia.edu, Reddit, Instagram, Vine, Livejournal, Craigslist, and Google+ contain privacy policies that regulate how users and developers utilize their services. (Though Vie [2014b] showed that users do not generally read these policies.) To create my own archive, I initially used screen shots. In total, I created 409 screen shots. I quickly realized, however, that these screen shots would not be searchable, so I also used copy and paste commands to create repositories in a Microsoft Word document. This strategy generated 185 pages of searchable data I could edit, highlight, and use Microsoft's "insert comment" function to tag. Decoding is very slow, however, as is transferring webpage code into Microsoft Word code, so this process was slightly tedious. I hope that in the future, tools will be developed that allow researchers to archive, tag, search, share, and sample their data, though I acknowledge that such tools may raise privacy concerns. Until these tools are developed, however, researchers will have to rely on traditional means of collecting and coding data. In the next section, I discuss the themes that emerged in my research to demonstrate the kinds of findings social media research can produce.

RESPONSES TO TIDE: CODING AND FINDINGS

Blythe (2007) wrote that:

> Coding requires researchers to identify a set of artifacts . . . to define a unit worth analyzing within them, to create codes for classifying instances of that unit, in many cases to test the reliability of that work, and to make these decisions and actions public. (p. 204)

However, "digital artifacts present new challenges because they are less stable

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3   Every social media scholar should be lucky enough to be married to a software engineer who can explain bots and web crawlers. Thanks, Bill Shato, for the clarification.

than printed artifacts, alter relations between creator and audience, and can incorporate multiple media" (p. 204). In other words, the very aspects of digital or multimodal media that attract both users and researchers are the same elements that complicate the coding of these texts. But as Blythe reminded us, coding is simply about defining a set of texts and selecting a sample from that text. I used dates to narrow my own analysis because the relevance of the event expires after a certain period of time. This approach narrowed my analysis down to the 667 posts made during the most active period of the incident. Blythe also outlined different ways in which units of analysis can be defined, including verbal units (in which he includes words, phrases, and clauses; t-units; exchanges; and rhetorical units) and nonverbal units (pp. 209-211). For my own coding, I focused on rhetorical units, which Blythe defined as "a segment that can be classified as one type of rhetorical move—a move with the same author, intended audience, and purpose" (p. 210). This unit of analysis seemed most appropriate for my coding because I looked at posts made almost entirely for the purpose of appealing to Tide. This methodological decision to focus on rhetorical units also echoes McKee and Porter's (2009) call to depend on rhetoric and casuistry to address problems in research ethics (p. 13). This unit of analysis led me to four code categories: appeals to Tide to change their position; expressions of anger with Tide for their decision; information exchange; and, finally, declarations of West Virginian identity. In this section, I briefly detail the subcategories of these codes and show what other social media scholars can learn from my codes.

The first theme that became relevant in my coding was appeals to Tide to change their decision. This strategy was the most often used of all the strategies for which I coded: 55.6 percent (or 371) posts used this appeal. These appeals utilized different rhetorical strategies, including descriptions of West Virginians who were affected by the accident as deserving of help, or an appeal utilizing ethos. For example, Rita Morrison posted, "I do not live there but those that do deserve your respect. ☺." The use of the emoji here points to the importance of looking at text rhetorically since this unit of analysis allows researchers to consider audience, author, tone, and purpose while other units of analysis might limit a scholar to text alone. Susan Hilligloss and Sean Williams (2007) argued that "the visual, far from being an adjunct to the verbal expression, instead merges with it to form a coherent argument or perspective on the topic being addressed" (p. 238). For more about visual activism, especially on Instagram, see Kara Poe Alexander and Leslie Hahner's chapter in this collection.

A second subcategory that emerged from this theme was users presenting the facts of the situation (logos) in an effort to convince Tide of the need of their services. This appeal was used in 36.4 percent of posts—243 posts. One user who utilized this strategy, Megan Lowry, said:

> Still thousands of people without water that won't have it for quite a while. They've lifted very few zones and have tons to go. And even the ones who zones were lifted some are still having significant water problems. The least they could do is setup where the water is safely working and help out the ones who won't have water for a while. (2014, January 15)

The final category that emerged in this theme was the trend of presenting details of the situation that might appeal to the readers' sympathies (pathos). Angela Messenger-Rishel (2014, January 13) wrote:

> Please reconsider! I am not affected, however, I have very dear friends that are. They have driven 2 hours to their family's house to bathe and do their laundry . . . they have 3 small children. Many people do not have the resources to get to an area to do this and for most people it's not even an option, especially if they don't have any family or friends out of that area. These people need your help! It's almost been a week that they haven't been able to use their water. Think of how that would affect you and how much laundry you would have.

That these appeals can be labeled so clearly with rhetorical terminology should be of no surprise. Long (2008) argued that local publics are communities constructed by people "around distinct rhetorical agendas" (p. 15).

The second theme that emerged from my coding was expressions of anger with Tide's decision. Anger was expressed in two ways: First, there were many calls for boycotts. Some users created memes to encourage others to boycott, while others simply declared their intention to never purchase Tide products again. Thirty-seven percent of the posts (247) declared a boycott. One Facebook user registered as Chris n Hollie Workman, whose comment resembles many other comments, urged readers to "dump your Tide down the toilet! They actually don't wanna come because it's not enough publicity!" (2014, January 13). Another strategy for expressing anger I found in this theme was to portray Tide representatives as not as tough or resilient as West Virginians affected by the accident. Twenty-three posts (3.4%) used this strategy. As an example, Mike Wilson commented, "You stupid city slickers wouldn't have lasted one day . . . ONE DAY! and would have been throwing a fit" (2014, January 13). If we accept that Facebook and other social media outlets are the new spaces for public protest in a privatized world, it is important for social media scholars to properly categorize and characterize expressions of anger in social media outlets. This particular strategy was closely related to the next theme I found.

The third category that emerged from my coding was declarations of West Virginian, Appalachian, or "hillbilly" identity. One hundred and twenty-three posts (18.4%) relied on this strategy. The effects of these posts were either to help create a sense of support and unity among the affected West Virginians or declare independence from outsiders and corporations. The importance of showing support to others online cannot be overemphasized. In this collection, Crystal Broch Columbini and Lindsey Hall underscore the significant role "lateral and supportive networks" played for homeowners struggling to renegotiate the terms of their mortgages in light of the 2008 housing crisis. One example of a post encouraging unity among West Virginians came from Brittni Woods and read, "We are mountaineers. We are strong and we love our neighbors and each other. We will stay strong and prevail once this is over" (2014, January 13). This post references both the state motto, *montani semper liberi* (mountaineers are always free) and the Bible's command to love thy neighbor. An example of a post declaring independence from outsiders, in addition to the post referencing city slickers already mentioned, is "A country boy will survive!!!! And country girls too! We don't need you so good luck when your sales go down TREMENDOUSLY!!!!!" (Clark-McCallister, 2014). This post references a well-known country song "Country Boys Can Survive" by Hank Williams, Jr.—a song with the lyrics "we come from the West Virginia coal mines" and a video that could have been shot on the Elk River itself.

Expressions of West Virginian, Appalachian, or "hillbilly" identity are complicated by the fact that these expressions are often imbedded in what Blythe (2007) called "latent content" (p. 215). As opposed to "manifest units," which are "observable phenomena in a text," "latent content, on the other hand, 'shifts the focus to the meaning underlying the elements on the surface of a message'" (p. 215). In other words, because I lived in West Virginia for twenty-three years, I recognize these expressions of identity that are intended for insiders to understand. A scholar who lacks this insider status may not correctly interpret or even detect latent content. This emphasizes the need for interviews with participants or a code reviewer who has insider status. One exemplar model that comes to mind here is McKee's interviews with researcher Yukari Seko in order to understand the methodological choices Seko made in her 2006 study of posts disclosing suicide in Internet chat groups (McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 104).

The final category I identified in my analysis was the use of this space as an information exchange. Two hundred and eighty-five posts (42.72%) utilized this space to share or obtain information. The sharing of information—both disseminating and gathering—reflects what Jackson and Wallin (2009) called the "back-and-forthness" of online exchanges, or what Barbara Warnick (2007) called "interactivity." Information changed hands in the comments section of Tide's posts

between people affected by the accident giving "real facts" of the situation, people affected by the accident attempting to gather "real facts" of the situation, and people outside not affected by the accident attempting to gather "real facts" of the situation. Liza Potts (2014) showed that "victims (of disasters) use the web to reach out to loved ones, find friends and family, or simply find help from the Red Cross or other emergency relief organizations. In essence, they have adapted the older practice of using media to 'reach out and touch someone'" (p. 10).

Further, she drew on more regulated systems in the wake of disasters like CNN's Katrina Safe List, which was unusable and incomplete (pp. 40-58). I can imagine that if the storm happened today, survivors would create a better system utilizing a twitter hashtag like #katrinasafelist or #KSL to locate loved ones. This trend of using social media to obtain and disseminate information rather than relying on regulated or established sources of news reflects a distrust for news media and public officials that not only pervaded the West Virginia area during the aftermath of the Freedom Industries accident, but also permeates through society. In fact, a recent study released by the Pew Research Center (2014a) found that only 19 percent of adults in the age range of 18-32 (the group known as millennials) say most people can be trusted. Take into account another Pew Research Center study that found that 90 percent of American millennials use social media (2014b) and we can see why distrust was a common theme among these posts. And, in fairness, this group of people had just lost faith in representatives who were supposed to protect them from problems like toxic chemicals in their water supply. Their distrust was justified.

In this section, I discussed what my codes showed about the data I researched. I conclude this chapter with some final recommendations for other social media scholars.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Methodological decisions, issues of informed consent, and other ethical decisions should not, as McKee and Porter (2009) showed, "be regarded so much as a binary with two unambiguously clear meanings at either end but rather as an interrelated continuum" (p. 77). Rather, social media scholars must consider context, location, and the processes that are appropriate and ethical for each social media artifact. Some final guidelines I urge social media scholars to consider include:

1. Scholars should be familiar with how sites function before studying them. By function, I do not only mean how the technology works (e.g., what links to click to get to specific e-locations), but I also mean how the social

media artifact functions in people's lives. Is this a public space? Do these users consider this a place rather than a space? Is this content sensitive? Are the users posting content that makes them vulnerable? Is attention to this text desirable?

2. Determine whether the interactions that occur in an e-location are consistent associations or remote associations. This distinction helps answer many ethical questions.

3. When in doubt about how to proceed in an e-location, draw a parallel between that location and a comparable face-to-face location. For example, in my study, I compared the Tide boycott posts to a protest march. Creating these comparisons to non-virtual spaces helps determine how to advance in virtual locations. In another example, I often use Twitter to communicate with corporate officials (e.g., I tweet to American Airlines to complain that my parents are stranded in Atlanta due to a plane's mechanical failure or I tweet to Haverty's thanking them for rescheduling the delivery of my new bed). These kinds of social media posts might be thought of like letters to the editor in a newspaper or private letters to corporate officials depending on the context. A blogging site like LiveJournal, WordPress, or Tumblr, on the other hand, poses a more complicated rhetorical situation for researchers. Individual texts must be considered on a case-by-case basis since some blog entries function like published texts and others are thought of as personal diaries.

McKee and Porter (2012) urged scholars to develop a "flexible process" for conducting Internet research, and this is especially true of social media texts, given the importance these spaces and places play in modern life. Similarly, Potts (2014) argued for understanding these systems "as participatory ecosystems that must allow for flexibility and responsiveness" (p. 2), which has become more crucial for scholars to "experience activities in ways similar to how participants experience them" (p. 9). As I found with my study of protest posts on Tide's Facebook page, social media has created a new space for writers to be heard and seen. Social media scholars must be cautious and methodical when determining how to study and represent their findings because the relationship between life on and off the web is complex and complicated.

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